

## Community and Family Structure

In the 1840s, '50s, and '60s, Oakland had an old slave community by Lower South standards, since the plantation had operated at the same site since the late eighteenth century. Many of its workers had colonial ancestors. It exhibited a strong degree of stability, even in the 1840s, which was not a prosperous period for cotton planters. Many marginal planters had to mortgage or even sell some of their slaves in the 1840s, but Prudhomme was not a marginal planter. He, like most large planters of Louisiana, simply stopped buying and tried to hold on to the slaves and other forms of capital they had accumulated in the flush early 1830s. The slave community underwent few changes. Oakland's workers were able to continue to form nuclear families, extend their kinship networks, and build a strong domestic structure.

Records are extensive enough at Oakland to indicate the presence of strong kinship networks by the mid 1840s. Enough data is already available to state that by the 1850s and early 1860s Bermuda/Oakland's slave community had most of its members in nuclear families of a parent or parents residing with their children. Others were part of married couples without children. Most singles had close relatives on the plantation and were not without familial support. In the mid 1840s, and even more so in the expansive and prosperous 1850s, Oakland's slave community

was well balanced in terms of gender and age distributions. As far as social stability, Oakland was almost ideal as a slave community. One third of its members were children between 1 month and sixteen indicating that the community was capable of reproducing itself. Forty-one percent were men and women of prime working and reproductive years, 17-34. And nearly a third (32 percent) were over forty, many of them over fifty, showing that the community had generational depth several generations were present, and kinship ties were extensive. These provided emotional depth and support in the community. Stable and mature communities, with well-developed kinship networks, were most likely to have the human resources to support members in crisis. As Oakland moved into the early 1860s, however, its aging population probably diminished its economic productivity.

Oakland, by the 1850's, had most of its membership in nuclear families of a parent or parents residing with their children. Others were part of married couples without children. Most singles had close relatives on the plantation.

All slaves lived in dread of losing family members through sale, transfer, estate division, or death. At Bermuda/Oakland in the 1840-1860 period, a few old slaves, such as Barbe would be able to recall having been wrenched from their families, kin, and homes in Africa or the Upper South for transport to Louisiana. By the latter antebellum period, however, most of the buying of slaves by the Prudhommes was of local slaves who would still have opportunities to see family members. In the mature phase of community development, families were rarely separated by sale; nor were transfers of great importance.

More threatening to the slave community and individual Families, was the prospect of death of owners and slave parents. Death of a primary owner sent ripples of dread throughout a slave community because it could mean separation of family members through estate sales or partition. The settlement of estate caused some slaves to be removed from their plantation but they remained in the general area.<sup>1</sup>

1. Oakland Plantation, Its People Testimony by Anne Malone pp. 78-79